



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 13 Issue 19

May 11, 2014

Rebellious Christians, Part 2

The Beauty of God's Kingdom

There are many things about the Kingdom of God that I love. I love the fact that God is a King and reigns over a literal Kingdom! As a citizen of this Kingdom, we have a most glorious future before us that transcends the grave! God has given us His word which is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path! His church and the glorious privilege of fellowship!

But of all the things of God's Kingdom, I love how the gospel impels the sinner to flee to God

though He is holy, awesome, most glorious and transcendent!

Isaiah 57:15a, “For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell *on* a high and holy place, and *also* with the contrite and lowly of spirit...”

The same Christ who frightened the disciples with His divine majesty (Matthew 17:6), is the same One who exhorted them.

Matthew 11:28-30, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.”

The same God whose glory shook a mountain when He manifested Himself to His people such that they feared for their lives (Exodus 20:18ff) is the same Being who said this:

Psalm 46:1-2, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea.”

While “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31), nevertheless the beauty, the tenderness, the love of this Being bids us come!

So there is an inherent conflict when it comes to a saving relationship with God. His glory might terrify us, but His grace draws us in. His love might lead us to take Him lightly; even criticize Him, but His holiness/His greatness will not allow us to stay there very long (Genesis 3:10; Judges 6:22; 13:22; Isaiah 6:5; Daniel 8:17; 10:9; Habakkuk 3:16; Revelation 1:17a).

The Book of Habakkuk records a moment in Habakkuk’s life which found the prophet embroiled in one such conflict. The date is 605 B.C. and the nation of Judah is about to be placed in subjection to the Babylonians just like the northern Kingdom of Israel before them. When Habakkuk got wind of God’s plan, the prophet first responded in anger!

Thus far we have seen that the first two chapters of this prophecy have four “movements.”

1. A heated accusation on the part of Habakkuk against God (Habakkuk 1:2-4) in which the prophet blames the Lord for the spiritual bankruptcy of the nation! To Habakkuk, ultimately it wasn’t the people’s fault that they were in rebellion; somehow it was God’s!
2. A shocking revelation of God’s plan to raise up a bigger bully to handle the many bullies which populated the nation of Judah at this time (Habakkuk 1:5-11). In v. 2, Habakkuk complained against God because “destruction and violence” were before him. In vv. 9-11, God deigned to address this by raising up a people who, “...come for violence... mock at kings... laugh at every fortress... whose strength is their god.”
3. The third movement involves the manipulative attempts of the prophet to try to change God’s mind (Habakkuk 1:12-17). He essentially says two things; (a) *God, to discipline your*

people as You did the Northern Kingdom would violate your eternity! Because You are eternal, so also must be your promises! That of course was a false assumption. (b) God, you are too pure to use such wicked vessels! Again, another false assumption! If God's purity prevented Him from using sinners, then the Lord couldn't use any man since all of us have sin!

4. The fourth movement involved a watershed event in Habakkuk's life (Habakkuk 2:4) where God essentially warned the prophet about the nature of a proud heart and yet the glorious benefit which results from stubbornly trusting the Lord and holding to His word. This being stated, God then described the horrible fate that awaited Babylon in which He details Five Woes- five basis for the condemnation that awaited the nation! That is "The Flow" of the first two chapters of Habakkuk!

Placing God in the Dock

Consider the people of God in Judah:

Habakkuk 1:3b-4, "...Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises. Therefore, the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted."

Recall that when Jehoiakim ascended to the throne in Judah (608-598 BC), he made sure that the focus of the nation rested on him! So during the uncertain and tumultuous days of that time- when shortages were everywhere and the threat of war loomed heavy- the king labored to prepare his people to build a lavish palace! Accordingly, Jeremiah indicted Jehoiakim with these words:

Jeremiah 22:15, 17, "Do you become a king because you are competing in cedar?... But your eyes and your heart are *intent* only upon your own dishonest gain, and on shedding innocent blood and on practicing oppression and extortion."

Jehoiakim's evil practices set the pace for all in Judah! To afford the building projects, the king had to stiff the upper class and take their money. This resulted in the upper class stiffing the lower classes to replace their money, and so on and so forth! In the end, the poor and needy paid the bill, being extorted, manipulated, trodden down, and ruined!

Now what makes this such a crime is the knowledge that God founded the nation upon a Covenant of Grace by which the Lord chose the poor, powerless, and needy with which to establish His people!

Deuteronomy 24:17-18, "You shall not pervert the justice due an alien *or* an orphan, nor take a widow's garment in pledge. But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing."

Judah's very existence testified to the grace of God; a grace which the nation for the most part had forgotten! Rather than "loving much," they fed off the struggles and hardship of the weak and needy! They had become worse than a pagan nation! Think of it: the gods of pagan nations were no-gods at all! But in Judah, the only wise God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, had become nothing more than a lucky charm against which to complain when things didn't go their way!

I'd like to say it wasn't that way among the genuine prophets of the Lord. But sadly, Habakkuk didn't rise much higher than the nation!

The Prophet Habakkuk

It is interesting to me that one of the reasons Habakkuk is one of the more popular prophets of the Old Testament is because of its glorious ending. Yet few consider the mental state that preceded that ending! It actually was rather wretched. Habakkuk was quite arrogant.

Habakkuk 1:3, "Why dost Thou make me see iniquity, and cause *me* to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises."

The complaint of Habakkuk here could only arise from a sinning, arrogant heart! Remember Isaiah 6 record's Isaiah's call to the prophetic ministry. At one point during this call, Isaiah responded to the glorious theophany by which he was confronted by saying this:

Isaiah 6:5, "Then I said, 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.'"

At the time of the writing of Isaiah, recall that Baalism had crept into the church such that the nation had become quite corrupt- both in its worship practices and ethical relationships! Yet unlike Habakkuk, Isaiah knew that as a sinner, he most certainly couldn't cast the first stone! Such a view has always graced the heart and mind of God's most humble servants. We see this in Paul.

1 Timothy 1:15, "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost *of all*."

In fact, Paul referred to his conversion as a botched abortion (1 Corinthians 15:8); in himself that is all he was! Such a mind-set is that which impelled

- Jeremiah as he lamented his youth, Jeremiah 1:6.
- The Publican as he received the glorious news of his forgiveness, Luke 18:13!
- The Psalmist in Psalm 120.

It is how God would have us live our lives, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” (Matthew 5:3-4)

Yet Habakkuk, at least for a time... at the beginning of this prophecy, did NOT embody this. *He wasn't like his countrymen, and he was angry at God for subjecting him to such filthy conditions!* That is why the watershed moment of this prophecy as it related to Habakkuk came when God called him to the carpet.

Habakkuk 2:4 “Behold [Habakkuk], as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him...”

In other words, Habakkuk! It is not right with your soul! You are sick, and in your sickness your judgment is skewed! If you are going to thrive in the coming months when your world will be turned upside down, you must let go of your pride and stubbornly hold on to Me by faith!

So at the writing of this prophecy, Habakkuk himself was sick with pride, a pride which led him to believe that God actually could be manipulated.

Habakkuk Thought of God as One who could be Manipulated

Habakkuk 1;12a, “Art Thou not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One? We will not die...”

In essence, Habakkuk’s response to the Lord’s announcement about Babylon was, *“No Lord, that’s not what is going to happen! As an eternal Being you’ve made some eternal promises which have tied your hands! You can’t destroy us! WE WILL NOT DIE!”* Habakkuk amazingly continued:

Habakkuk 1:13a, “[Furthermore] *Thine* eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness *with* favor....”-

In other words, *“Lord, you cannot use the Chaldeans... they are too evil. Because You are pure, You can’t use them!”* To believe the best about Habakkuk here is to make him a simpleton or just plain ignorant! Does he actually believe that God had fallen into error? That somehow the Lord had made a mistake in His judgments? NO! What we have here is the heart of a manipulator who dares to pick up Job’s argument against God and so “instruct the Lord” (Job 40:7)!

Habakkuk 1:2-3a, “How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, ‘Violence!’ Yet Thou dost not save. Why dost Thou make me see iniquity, and cause *me* to look on wickedness?”

I have yet to reference this, but Habakkuk in this passage chose to appeal to God in the form of

a Lament! In Biblical poetry, there are various and sundry “forms” around which to organize ones thoughts. For example in the Psalter, there are these forms:

- Thanksgivings- which have a definite form.
- Songs of praise.
- Wisdom psalms.
- Royal/Messianic psalms- which have a definite form!
- Imprecatory Psalms.
- Laments.

Habakkuk chose the latter form to level his complaint against God (cf. Psalm 3; 13; 22). It is important to note that the expected response on the part of God to this lament would have been an assurance of deliverance/salvation. Accordingly by placing his complaint to God in the form of a lament, Habakkuk identified himself with the godly struggles of David, Asaph, and Korah. And thereby expected a positive answer from the Lord, *“Well if you put it like that, Habakkuk...”*

It might be said that Habakkuk had no other form with which to frame his argument to God than a Lament, and that may be. Yet there is no question that throughout the first chapter of this prophecy, Habakkuk endeavored to manipulate God to a specific action. That brings us to Habakkuk’s third error, Habakkuk was unloving toward God and presumed the worst.

Unloving Toward God; Presuming the Worst

Habakkuk 2:1. “I will stand on my guard post and station myself on the rampart; and I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, and how I may reply when I am reproved.”

This is a transition verse between Habakkuk’s second response to God and the Lord’s reply. In it Habakkuk utilizes the language of a prophet with a twist. God indeed had “stationed” His prophets as a guard, yet their focus was to be the nation and its people (cf. 2 Samuel 12; 1 Kings 17–22; Amos 7:8–9). They truly were “watchmen” over the house of Israel and Judah! Yet amazingly, Habakkuk looked in the opposite direction. Rather than stationing himself as a watchman over Judah; Habakkuk stationed himself as a watchman over God (again, arrogance was a major problem in Habakkuk’s interaction here with God)!

But then we read of an admission which ought to have shocked you the first time you read it. Notice the end of v. 1, “...I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, and how I may reply when I am reproved.” Habakkuk gives us two further admissions that are shocking:

- “I will keep watch to see... how I may reply.” You ever witness two people arguing in which both no longer are listening to each other, but are planning on what they are going to say as the other person speaks? It is pretty ugly! Neither party cares about the other person; they just want to be right! They want to win the argument! That’s how

Habakkuk spent his time as he waited on God's reply! He doesn't care what God is going to say next! He is after one thing: vindication!

- "I will keep watch to see... how I may reply when I am reproved." Amazing! Habakkuk knows so well the mind of God; he's pegged God down to a tee! He knows what God is going to say before He says it! And what is it that God was going to say? *God was going to "reprove" him! See, that's what God does; He's unapproachable!* The word for "reprove" is a forensic term used in a court of law to describe the verdict of a judge in the context of a guilty person. It is a covenant word used in the context of covenant lawsuits. It implies an exposure of sin and an appeal to repentance. Now in this context, there are two words which actually could have been used, -רָצַח (yāsār): has the notion of paternal chastisement and so presupposes familial love or יָכַח (yākah): denotes a discipline as a result of God's judicial actions. It is the latter term which is used here! Accordingly, Habakkuk knows exactly how God is going to respond. The Lord is going to rebuke him, chastise him, and so straighten him out!

Taken together, these three points don't give the best portrait of Habakkuk. While he hasn't sunk to the lows of his nation, nevertheless his arrogance and the assumptions made as he approached the Lord are rather ugly. But perhaps that too is why this prophecy is so popular. Habakkuk is just like us! He not only struggled with sin, but the sin itself colored how he thought about God! If there were a poster child in the Old Testament of one who struggled with God, Habakkuk no doubt would be a prime candidate!

So how did God respond? Was it a swift, harsh rebuke (as Habakkuk expected)? Was it condemnation for the nation?

The Faithfulness of the Lord

Habakkuk 2:3: "Then the Lord answered me and said, 'Record the vision and inscribe *it* on tablets, that the one who reads it may run.'"

God called Habakkuk to "record the vision and inscribe it on tablets..."- notice the plural; God wanted the prophet to utilize more than one tablet. That is significant because the vision here inscribed would NOT have required more than one tablet on which to record it (it is only vv. 4-5)! So why the plural?

There clearly is an intentional allusion here to the tablets which God used when He entered into a Covenant Relationship with His people (Exodus 24:12; 31:18; 32:15-16; 34:1, 28; Deuteronomy 9:9-11; 10:2, 4; 2 Chronicles 5:10). Furthermore, it was these "tablets" that were in mind when God renewed the covenant in the Old Testament, that glorious moment when the Lord drew near to His people and together they renewed their wedding vows! This no doubt is why Jewish tradition declared that the "613 laws of the Pentateuch had been reduced to one by Habakkuk!" Understanding the Hebrew and the significance of the calling in this text impels us to see that God here did NOT condemn the prophet or the nation. RATHER, He deigned to remind them of

their wedding vows! O. Palmer Robertson wrote:

Reflecting the long-established pattern of inscribing a fresh copy of covenant law as an essential step in covenant renewal, Habakkuk's instructions include inscribing his vision on the tablets. (Robertson, 1990, p. 168)

Isn't that beautiful? God's response to the nation and the prophet was NOT condemnation, BUT reconciliation! It was to remind them of their love-relationship, a relationship which would "reframe" the horrors that lay in front of them and enable the one who would stubbornly cling to God by faith to thrive! David wrote these words as he faced the hour of trial:

Psalm 16:5-6, "The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and my cup; Thou dost support my lot. [Because of this, notice how David viewed his difficult future...] The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places; indeed, my heritage is beautiful to me."

To behold trial and difficulty through the eye of faith is to see the struggles as they really are: momentary and light (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18)! That really is all that was before the nation!

You say, "Wait a minute! If God so loved the nation, why did He ordain the exile? Why not just call it off?" To answer this, we need to go back to the time when the National Covenant was established:

Leviticus 26:3-4, 11-12, 14a, 16-17, "If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit...¹¹ Moreover, I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people...¹⁴ But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments...¹⁶ I, in turn, will do this to you: I will appoint over you a sudden terror, consumption and fever that shall waste away the eyes and cause the soul to pine away; also, you shall sow your seed uselessly, for your enemies shall eat it up. And I will set My face against you so that you shall be struck down before your enemies; and those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when no one is pursuing you."

After God brought His people out of slavery, He organized them into a nation! Yet unlike their relationship with God via the Abrahamic covenant (which was unconditional), the National Covenant was based on the conduct of the nation and its king. If the nation/king followed the Lord, Israel would thrive. But if as a nation/king they rejected the Lord, the Lord would reject the nation- which is what the exiles were all about!!

So does that mean God rejected His people when the nation fell? Absolutely not! Notice how the passage we just looked at ends.

Leviticus 26:44-45, "Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not

reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God. But I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors [that is, the Abrahamic Covenant], whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations [prior to when they had become a nation], that I might be their God. I am the Lord.”

Family of God, do you understand? The exiles of 722 BC and 586 BC did NOT represent a rejection on the part of God of His people! No bitter providence ever could! Rather the exiles came about as just payment for Israel’s National Rebellion! Yet as Individuals in Christ, they were never abandoned! God was always their God and always was with them, even as they travelled into exile! Accordingly, the wretchedness of the people of God in Judah at the time of the writing of this prophecy and the proud, arrogant heart of Habakkuk could NOT separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!

With this, I want to close by asking a very important question: “Was Habakkuk in the right in how he approached the Lord in this prophecy?”

I hope you see that the answer obviously is, “No!” We ought never to approach the Lord in a proud and arrogant manner. However, let me ask a second question: “Was Habakkuk wrong in approaching God with his burden?”

The answer to this one is also a strong “No!” Family of God, we are sinners; we ought never to take that lightly nor forget as we approach the Lord that.

Ecclesiastes 5:2b, “...God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few.”

However, had Habakkuk feared making a mistake in his relationship with God such that he withdrew from prayer until he could “perfectly” approach God, not only would he never approach God again in prayer (for he could never do it perfectly), but this prophecy would never have been written! O. Palmer Robertson wrote:

This perspective may provide a proper context for answering the question concerning whether the prophet remained within the bounds of propriety in asking these questions. Since prayer is provided specifically as the framework in which all the burdens of God’s people may be poured out before the Lord, prayers expressing perplexity are appropriate so long as they are offered in a context of trust. (Robertson, 1990, p. 138)

From this we conclude that it is so important for us to go to God with our burdens and lay them at His feet, regardless of the packaging!

Psalm 55:22, “Cast your burden upon the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken.”

Yes, endeavor at all times to approach God respectfully. But listen! God is more interested in our

prayers than the flowery language we might use to express them!

So what is it that you love most about the Kingdom of God? Is it that

- God is a King and reigns over a literal Kingdom!
- As a citizen of this Kingdom, we have a most glorious future before us that transcends the grave!
- God has given us His word which is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path!
- His church and the glorious privilege of fellowship!

I would be hard-pressed to say! But one of the most precious characteristics about our relationship with God is that He calls us to come, warts and all, unto Him and lay our burdens down! Christian, if you are heavy laden this day with sin, do not run away, but run to your Lord! He will by no means cast you out! But He will wrestle with you!

Bibliography

Robertson, O. P. (1990). *The Books of Nahum Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The web address for all sermons at Bethel Presbyterian Church can be found out as follows: <http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on May 11, 2014. Greg is the minister of Bethel Presbyterian Church